

# Wellness Notes

## Smell\*

(Part I)

### Problems with Smell

Problems with smell are common in older people. Thirty percent of older Americans between the ages of 70 and 80 have a problem with their sense of smell. Two out of three people over 80 have a problem with their sense of smell. Problems with smell can have a big impact on the lives of older people. Our sense of smell lets us fully enjoy the scents and fragrances in the environment, like roses, coffee, and rain.

Smell is also important to our appreciation of food; without smell we would not be able to fully enjoy the flavors of food and beverages. But, even more important, smell can be a warning signal that something is wrong in our environment. Smell helps us to know when food is spoiled or if there is a gas leak.

The sense of smell is part of our chemical sensing system or the "chemosenses." Normal smell occurs when odors around us, like the fragrance of flowers or the smell of baking bread, stimulate the olfactory, or small nerve cells, that are responsible for the sense of smell. The olfactory cells are located in a small patch of tissue high inside the nose. Odors release microscopic molecules into the environment and stimulate these small nerve cells. Once the cells detect the molecules, they send messages to our brain, where we identify smell.

For most people a problem with smell is a minor irritation, but for others it may be a sign of more serious diseases and conditions. When people have a problem with smell, they may experience total or partial loss of smell. They can sometimes think they smell bad odors that are not actually present. People with smell disorders usually have problems appreciating food flavors, too.

Smell and taste are closely linked in the brain, but are actually distinct sensory systems. True tastes are detected by taste buds on the tongue and are limited to sweet, salty, sour, bitter, savory and perhaps a few other sensations. Many people mistakenly believe they have a problem with taste, when they are really experiencing a problem with their sense of smell. Loss of smell occurs a lot more frequently than loss of taste.

When smell is impaired, food loses its appeal and we may eat too much and gain weight or eat too little and lose too much weight. Loss of smell may also cause us to eat too much sugar or salt to make our food taste better. This can be a problem for people with certain medical conditions, such as diabetes or high blood pressure.

Many older people believe there is nothing they can do about their diminished sense of smell. Depending on the cause of your problem, your doctor may be able to treat your smell disorder or suggest new ways to cope with the loss of smell. If you think you have a problem with your sense of smell, see your doctor.